DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 602 RC 011 586

AUTHOR Smith, Joyce L.; Jenkins, Quentin A. L.
TITLE Cotton Chopping to Administrative Chairperson: The Changing Role of Women on Small Farms.
PUB DATE 23 Aug 79
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society (Burlington, Vermont, August 23-26, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Agricultural Laborers; *Behavior Change; Changing Attitudes; *Farmers; *Farm Management; *Females; Housewives; *Identification (Psychological); Life Style; Role Conflict; Role Models; *Role Perception; Rural Environment; *Rural Family; Rural Farm Residents; Self Actualization; Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; Sharecroppers; Social Change; Working Women
IDENTIFIERS *Louisiana

ABSTRACT

The objectives of this case study are to determine the personal, family, and community interactions of women on small farms, to determine how women on small farms are affected by social and cultural change, and to determine the influence of significant and generalized others on the behavior of women on small farms. The theoretical framework includes the elements of symbolic interaction and role theory and embraces the role-making process, the "folk norm of consistency", the tentative nature of interaction, the process of role verification, and self-conception and role, all of which show linkage between roles as a social change process and reactions of members of the small farm communities. Subjects are 54 Louisiana families, including 111 females, who are participating in a Small Farmer's Project, cultivate at least 4 acres, and report less than $5,000 income from the farm enterprise. Beginning in August 1978, the families are studied for 9 months through participant observation. Findings indicate that the small farm families are still traditionally oriented; most females are from relatively poor small farm backgrounds; though the women consider their husbands and fathers as directors of the farming operation, they are not usually dominated by the men and have considerable control of financial affairs and decision making; sons are taught small farm work ethics, while daughters are given special consideration in formal education. (NEC)

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COTTON CHOPPING TO ADMINISTRATIVE CHAIRPERSON: THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN ON SMALL FARMS

Joyce L. Smith

Quentin A.L. Jenkins

Department of Sociology
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

August 23-26, 1979

Paper presented at the Rural Sociological Society's Annual Meetings, Burlington, Vermont, August 23-26, 1979.

RC011586

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a case study of 54 small farm families located in several small rural Louisiana communities. These families are participating in a Small Farmer's Project. The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. The major focus of the study is to present an in depth analysis of the social factors characterizing the roles of women on small farms and to explain how these factors are related to the nature and type of organization of their farming system, and to their production efficiency. This paper will investigate selected factors which shape the behavior of women on small farms in their interactive roles, their work roles, and their work satisfaction. These roles are observed, in many cases, in terms of their relationship to men. The study is concentrated largely upon the breadth of the tasks performed by women, and their perceptions and orientations to these tasks.

Small farms are an essential and integral part of the rural scene in Louisiana today. According to the 1974 Census of Agriculture, nearly 11,000 or one-third of the approximately 33,500 farms in Louisiana are less than 50 acres in size; 52.7 percent have less than 100 productive acres and 73 percent have annual sales of less than $20,000. Even though we have seen a loss of about 2,000 farms a year in Louisiana over the last ten years, many of them being small farms, about 70 percent of the farms in Louisiana are still classified as small farms. It is evident from these statistics that small farms comprise a large portion of the total population of farms in Louisiana.

An important social factor which is often overlooked or avoided by researchers is the role of women on small farms as they interact within their social setting. Since many small farms are considered as family farms, the roles that are performed by female family members are essential to the nature of agricultural production, decision-making, social interaction, satisfaction with their farming life style and the relationship of the family to other institutions.

The development of the women's movement has begun to focus attention on the changes that are paramount in the roles of women on small farms and how these changes affect the status and position of these women. Traditionally, the roles of women on small farms, though quite diverse, have been defined as a complement to the male role which was anchored in the farming occupation. The male's occupational role has been important in determining the possibility and character of the woman's identification bond to the male. The identification bond was strengthened when the female could serve as an interpreter, supporter, and extender of the male's role. Because the male had to adjust to the demands of his roles and the family had to adust to the demands on behalf of his role obligations, the male appeared to dominate his family. The conditions to which the roles of women on small farms were formally adaptive have changed radically, and alternative roles have appeared. However, none of these changing roles are complete and fully sanctioned by the normative standards of the small farm settings. Nevertheless, the roles of rural women are changing, and we can be sure that the changes are evolutionary in the same way that changes in the roles and identities of urban and suburban women have developed (Flora and Johnson, 1978).

PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

For many years, sociologists have neglected the roles of women on small farms as a topic for both quantitative and qualitative research. Joyce and Leadley (1977) notes that the development of research on women in rural America was not initiated until the late 1920's and early 1930's. This initiation was stimulated by the Purnell Act of 1925, in which Congress appropriated funds to study the use of time by homemakers. These studies focused on the management of time and energy in the home and were important because they were the first to study the behavior of women in rural areas.

The later studies, although they focused on social and economic problems of rural women basically classified rural women as wives. This perspective restricted rural women to a sphere delineated by males and described in male terms (Joyce and Leadley, 1977:13).

It was not until the 1970's that researchers began to focus attention on rural women as women with identities separate from their husbands and fathers. Rural women are now being examined in regard to social and economic conditions as individuals for the first time in sociological research. Unfortunately, in spite of this tremendous change of focus on the research of rural women "what we know specifically about women in rural areas as a result of these studies is not clear cut, because more questions arise from the research than concrete answers" (Joyce and Leadley, 1977:18).

The problems addressed in this study are (1) what are the roles of women on small farms, and (2) how are these roles related to the nature and type of organization of their farming system?

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To determine the personal, family and community interactions of women on small farms.

2. To determine how women on small farms are affected by social and cultural change?

3. To determine the influence of significant and generalized others on the behavior of women on small farms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used in this study includes two major elements, namely symbolic interaction and role theory.

In the symbolic interaction perspective, social action and interaction are constantly being created through a process of self-indication, in which the person pieces together and guides his actions by everything of relevance to him in terms of its significance for his goal seeking activities. This process is essentially what is called "taking the role of the other," in which the individual anticipates the meanings that others give to his actions (Mead, 1934:227). As the individual "takes the role of the other" in social interaction, he defined the situation, orders his behavior based on a shared culture and views himself as others see him, from a partially objective rather than a wholly subjective viewpoint (Blumer, 1969:1-6).

Symbolic interaction used in conjunction with role theory develops a model of conformity in which actors perceive, enact, and receive social approval for conforming behavior (Turner, 1962). This essentially allows for the utilization of Mead's concept of "role-taking" in the process of social interaction. Much action and interaction does not involve simple

conformity but active construction and reciprocal lines of conduct among actors who seek to come to terms with each other in less structured situations.

The enactment of roles represents social change within small farm settings. The reactions of alter or reciprocal roles may be favorable, unfavorable, or indifferent to social change based on the nature of their values, beliefs, attitudes, social positions, and perceived meanings of the situation. The reactions of the roles may be overt or latent, depending on the degree of involvement with the reciprocal roles and the degree to which the roles influence the lives of people as individuals or as a collectivity.

The theoretical framework embraces the following propositions, which show linkage between roles as a social change process and reactions of members of the small farm communities.

1. The Role-Making Process - As women in small farm settings interact with others there is a tendency for them to experience their world as roles. They can identify with these roles by "putting themselves in the other's role."

2. The "Folk Norm of Consistency" - As women in small farm settings interact with others, they group the other's behavior into a coherent pattern. In so doing, they are able to "make sense" of the other's actions, anticipate responses from others, and adjust their responses to others. If responses from others are not consistent with role expectations, social interaction will be problematic.

3. The tentative nature of interaction - The women in small farm settings are constantly interpreting role cues to assess their consistency with previously existing ones. If they are consistent, these women will continue to adjust responses based on the imputed roles of others. However, if they are inconsistent, the perception of the other's role will be revised. The imputation of a role will persist as long as it provides a stable framework for interaction.

4. The process of Role verification - The women in small farm settings have a need to verify that the interactional situations in which they are involved do constitute role behavior. This verification of behavior is based on a modeling of behavior after other women of their community who engage in a similar life style or through groups and organizations to which they belong.

5. Self-conception and Role - The self-conceptions of women on small farms are attached to their roles. They develop self-attitudes and feelings out of their interactions with others, and present themselves in certain ways so as to reinforce their self-conceptions.

These assumptions are based on the processual nature of the roles of women on small farms which emphasize both the temporal and spatial dimensions of their life situations. They also point to the normal processes of interaction, yet they are general enough to embrace the possibility of conflicting and stressful interactions. The structured nature of interaction is also implicit in these assumptions since formal norms and status positions are the major factors in determining the changing roles of women on small farms, in addition to being the basic source of validation for imputed roles.

METHODOLOGY

The site of the study was several small rural Louisiana communities located in a parish that was predominantly rural according to the definition used by the 1970 census. The women were either actual participants, or their husbands or fathers were participants in a Small Farmer's Project. The requirements for participation were at least four acres of land under cultivation and a reported income of less than $5,000 from the farm enterprise.

The Small Farmer's Project, which began in August, 1978, was designed to provide specialized training in agricultural production, marketing,

and management to small farmers and their families. Special emphasis was placed on labor-intensive, higher-income producing technology transferral, with the development of necessary markets to sustain participants self-employment efforts.

A total of 54 families, which included 111 females, were studied for nine months through participant observation. During the period of participant observation, interactions of the work situation, and participation within home and formal group settings were studied. The situations were observed by means of an observation check sheet designed to determine behavioral and interactive roles (See Appendix A).

In conjunction with the participant observation, the women were interviewed informally in order to assess their perceptions of their roles. These informal interviews were conducted in casual conversation. Although there was adequate probing and follow-up, the informal interviews were essentially guided by the women.

Written records were made on each small farm family visited. These records existed in three sets. The first set included personal information on the small farm families, the second set included interaction information, notes from observation, and role perceptions that had been expressed during the interviews, and the third set included the information on roles that had been projected during participation in formal and informal sessions of the Small Farmer's Project.

These notes were recorded according to the techniques of Schatzman and Strauss (1973). The observational notes were statements bearing upon events experienced principally through watching and listening. They

included evidence for some yet to be realized proposition or as a property of context or situation in that they expressed the who, what, when, where and how of the activity of the small farm families. The theoretical notes were the controlled attempts to derive meaning from the observational notes. They allowed interpretations, inferences and conjectures for the development of new concepts, and linkages between the new concepts and older ones. The methodological notes consisted of statements that reflected the operational procedures. They were instructions and reminders which gave a sense of direction and organization to the research. They reflected timing, sequencing, setting and maneuvering.

The field notes were analyzed according to Lofland (1971), in terms of acts, activities, meanings, participation, relationships, and settings. The system of analysis included arranging the situations in an orderly fashion along a continuum from the most microscopic to the most macroscopic social phenomenon. The general idea in the process of analysis was to discover significant classes or categories of things, persons, and events and the properties that characterized them. It was necessary to synthesize these classes or categories with one another, at first with simple propositional statements that expressed linkages or relationships, and gradually until the propositions fell into sets in an increasing density of linkages or relationships.

FINDINGS

Interaction Among Family Members

In spite of the fact that there have been changes within the American family structure, the small farm families were still traditionally

oriented. Almost all of the females studied were born of parents who were active in small farm agriculture. During their childhood they had assisted their parents on the land and around the home as soon as they could perform light chores. Much of their time has been spent performing household duties, with physical labor only being performed during the peak season of farming. There had been a good deal of parental socialization among the women which resulted in them perceiving their roles only as members of a small farm family. The family being relatively poor, emphasized perserving the strong ties of the extended family of orientation.

These women considered their husbands and fathers as directors of the farming operation. This was based on the "folk" norm of consistency in that it was the males name that was associated with the farm land. However, the women maintained a close association with child rearing and emotionally supported the family. Although it was not formally acknowledged, the women were not usually dominated by the men. This was specifically observed in the amount of control that women held in financial affairs and decision-making.

The relationship between males and females was often an uneasy one at least partly as a result of being poor and having to support a large family, yet the prospect of divorce was nil. The role relationships between men and women had been verified by the community and its religious orientation. One male farmer expressed the admiration and appreciation for the support that his wife had given him in this way, "if it was not for that old lady, I would have not been able to make it. I'll kill a dead snake for messing with her."

Although the women were in "charge" of the farming operation, they had not forsaken their traditional female roles. This conception of roles was held by both males and females. The old adage of "a woman's place is in the home," certainly held true for these farm families, but the adage seemed a facade. A large proportion of the women did a considerable amount of field work. In fact, the usual practice was for the women to work in the field as much as their housekeeping and cooking permitted, particularly during harvest time. They worked just as hard as the males in order to complete the harvest at a reasonable time. In addition, there was also the traditional female roles to perform.

One interaction pattern that existed within the small farm families was the role relationships of sons and daughters. In essence, the sons were "loved" but the daughters were "raised". In other words, when a son was "loved" he could successfully interpret role cues, but a daughter had to be "raised" in order to successfully interpret the role cues. As a result of this parental orientation, more emphasis was placed on physical labor for males. This essentially meant teaching the males a small farm work ethics which included the importance of doing hard work to economically support themselves and their families. Daughters, on the other hand, were given special consideration in formal education, in order to support themselves just in case they didn't marry "a good old country boy." Although the small farm work ethic of hard work was emphasized for females, it was not as pronounced as for males. The parental realization of females as the motivators for successful farm production meant that females had to be "raised" with some expertise in

the business of farming. This essentially meant learning some intellectual skills rather than totally physical skills. This orientation was very important is assessing the educational level of the farmers. The mean level of education completed was 9.6 years for women compared to 4.8 years for men.

Interaction in Groups and Organizations

Many of the social activities of these farmers centered around the church, which served as both an educational agency and an informational center. The success of the traditional Catholic fairs, Mardi Gras festivals, boucheries*, and Saturday night dances was dependent upon the roles that were performed by the women. As a result of the educational hierarchy that existed among the farmers, the women were more actively involved in their church related organizations and activities. They were more effective planners, and persevered until the planned goals had been achieved. The men often expressed that they had neither the time nor the energy to prepare for these activities. However, many of these religious celebrations were associated with basic changes in agriculture and occurred when there was little farm work to be done.

The participation in the Small Farmer's Project was initiated through a number of meetings designed to communicate helpful farm information, formally educate in reading, writing and arithmetic, and train for adequate farm production. Although many of the males could not read

* A boucherie is a community hog killing that took place in the small farm communities. It provided an ideal setting for social interaction.

or write, they were not unintelligent. Because of the special set of circumstances that existed (i. e. poor and having to support a large family) they were unable to take advantage of opportunities available to many of their rural counterparts. As one farmer aptly put it, "I may be short on book learning, but I got plenty of mother wit." Another said, "I can figure good in my head but when it come down to putting it on paper I can't do it." This inability to read or write did not exist among the women, however some of them did have difficulty performing these tasks.

Through interactions within the Small Farmer's Project, the administrative roles of the women were more actively expressed. In terms of land and labor, the male farmers could more adequately express how much labor was needed to produce certain types of crops, but the women were more aware of the technical aspects of land ownership, cash tenancy, and sharecropping. Their roles were assumed based on the social values that they held. The male work roles were based on a seasonal type of farming system, while the female work roles were continuous.

Capital and credit was problematic for these farmers. Both men and women were skeptical of lending institutions and stated that the parish institutions, whether local, state or federal, had a reputation of discriminating against them. They related this discrimination to their race and their small land holdings. The attainment of material success, as manifested in a level of living, was not accomplished solely on the basis of the small farmer's ability, but reflected a set of values and beliefs by means of which they could rationalize success or the lack

of it. "Success" for these farmers was based on having the necessities of life, i. e. adequate food, clothes, shelter and transportation. The women determined these necessities as they related to the family and were much more concerned with saving money. In addition, the practical aspects of "success" were based on being able to maintain the small farm and to get their children involved in the small farm operation.

The Small Farmer's Project emphasized the establishment of adequate farm inventories and plans with diversified farming operations. The families were urged to keep records of all of their farm expenditures. These farmers, as a whole, did not keep very good farm records, if they kept them at all. The men had neither the training nor the time to keep good sets of farm records. Many of them complained that they had to spend too much time doing farm labor leaving too little time for management. They had been accustomed to memorizing their farm expenditures which has obvious limitations. Although they prided themselves with being able to memorize things very well, they failed to realize that many things could not be recalled to memory when needed. The women, on the other hand, were much more effective in accumulating farm expenditures and more active in keeping the written records for the farming operation.

SUMMARY

The results of this study suggest that a woman's self-conception of her roles in a small farm setting is important in determining those performed in the successful operation of the family's farming enterprise. However, many of these self-conceptions were based on not having other satisfying alternatives available to them. In addition, the traditional

parental socialization was influential in the process of role verification for these women.

The roles that were performed by the women had a great influence on the social interaction that existed within the small farm families. As Lewis found in Mexico, these women also projected overt, passive roles (Lewis, 1953). It was observed that the women had more active roles than was admitted by either themselves or the active roles than was admitted by either themselves or the males. This situation related to the educational attainment of the women, which gave them an edge on certain skills necessary for successful rural living, i. e. reading, writing, and arithmetic. Many of the males lacked confidence in themselves for performing these tasks and primarily depended upon the female members of the family for these things. However, males expected a certain amount of respect from the women and always wanted to be regarded as head of their households. This traditional male dominance role placed the women in "subservient" roles in which they responded primarily to the needs of the males. In addition to carrying out the traditional female roles, the women were unpaid farm laborers who worked the fields just as hard as the men during the peak seasons of farming.

It was consistently expressed by the males that they wanted women who were concerned about the small farm as a source of income, and children who showed honor and obedience to them. This value orientation gave the the women a great deal of covert control over the farming operation. This was particularly true if the women projected some satisfaction with their roles in the community and in social situations.

Although these women had been given hidden tasks and roles by the males, they have much to offer to the success of small farms. It is necessary to research these roles more thoroughly in order to assess the degree of influence present among these women and their perceptions of that influence. Further research is presently being conducted in these areas.

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APPENDIX A

OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

I. The Social Organization of the Small Farm. Does it allow for:
   (a) Security --This will be observed in how satisfied the small farmer is with his life style.
   (b) Time --The time that the small farmer spends in farm work and off farm pursuits.
   (c) Cultural Experiences --Observation will be made of the types of reading materials that are available in the home and the types of activities engaged in outside of work.
   (d) Health --The cleanliness of the home and surroundings and the attitudes that they might project toward medical facilities.

II. Roles of the Small Farmer
   (a) As a family member --leadership within the family or dominant or submissive roles.
   (b) As a worker --leader or follower, or who performs the most basic work roles that are important to the farm.
   (c) As a business person --how and by whom are the financial relationships being carried out?
   (d) As a community member --the nature and type of the influence.
   (e) As a group or organization member --how active is the small farmer in these pursuits?
   (f) As a leader or follower --what type of leadership is portrayed and from what source?
   (g) Would these roles lead to stability or satisfaction or would they lead to stress and become potentials for dissatisfaction and conflict?

III. Community Solidarity
   (a) Socio-economic status --the individual in relation to his community.
   (b) Ownership of property --does it create a hierarchial arrangement?
   (c) Length of time in the Community --how important it is in creating a status hierarchy?
   (d) Willingness to leave the community or the desire to stay at all costs.
   (e) Social Interaction --the types that exist and whether it is a source of needed information.
   (f) Types of leadership --what variables are they based on?

IV: Decision Making and Direction
   (a) Self --does the small farmer make decisions without the assistance of others.
   (b) Neighbors --what degree of dependency is there upon them?
   (c) Agricultural Extension Service --dependency.
   (d) Agricultural cooperatives --how important are they to the small farmers?
   (e) Weather forecast, intuition or natural conditions.
   (f) Agricultural magazines, newsletters or almanacs.

V. The Cooperative Spirit
   (a) Participation in cooperatives --attendence at meetings.
   (b) Leadership --the amount of input the small farmer makes in the cooperative endeavor.
   (c) Trustworthiness

VI. General Attitude to Agriculture and to their Small Farm Operation.
(a) Carefree
(b) Mediocre
(c) Keen

VII. Attitude to Questioning and Observation
(a) Reluctant
(b) Deceptive
(c) Open and Abliging

APPENDIX B

FARM INVENTORY

TAKEN FROM RECORDS OF THE SMALL FARMERS PROJECT

I. PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. Name of farmer _____ Age _____
2. Spouse _____
3. Number of children living at home _____

List Names and Ages

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

II. PROPERTY

A. LAND

1. Does farmer own, rent or share? Circle one
2. Please give size of farm in acres ____ _____
3. List whether crops are planted and acreage planted, how many acres of land is pasture and how many acres lay idle.

CROPS & ACREAGE	PASTURE	IDLE LAND

B. REAL ESTATE

1. Size of house _____ Condition of house _____
2. Barn Space _____ Condition of barn _____

Please list any other building such as garage, chicken coup, pantry, etc.

_____ _____ _____

_____ _____ _____

III. FARM MACHINERY AND EQUIPMENT

Please itemize machinery and equipment and state its condition

1. _____ _____
2. _____ _____

3. _____ _____
4. _____ _____
5. _____ _____
6. _____ _____

IV. LIVESTOCK

1. Beef Cattles (no. of heads)_____
2. Dairy Cattles (no. of heads)_____
3. Swine _____
4. Sheep _____
5. Poultry (ducks, chickens, turkeys etc.)_____

V. Crops, Acreage, estimated harvest date, and condition of crops.

CROPS & ACREAGE	HARVEST DATE	CONDITION OF CROPS

VI. FEED, SEED, CHEMICALS AND OTHER SUPPLIES ON HAND

FEEDS	SEEDS	CHEMICALS	OTHER

REMARKS, (SUMMARY, RECCOMMENDATIONS, POTENTIAL)